New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Love's Labour's Lost"

The New York Times

February 5, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

After a glimpse of "Love's Labour's Lost," which opened at the City Center last evening, it is easy to understand why this Shakespearean comedy has not been played here since 1891. It is not very good. Or, to be more exact, it is most uneven. For the elaborate hocus-pocus with which it begins is tedious, and the wordy burlesques in the middle section no longer have dramatic pertinence. It is only in the last act, when the form changes into pure masque, that "Love's Labour's Lost" shakes itself into some sort of coherence and emerges as pleasant entertainment.

Originally Shakespeare wrote it, not for the commercial theatre but for some party where the audience would be especially gay, and may, in fact, have taken part in the performance. The commercial theatre is still not the best environment. But it is to be feared that the current performance, under Albert Marre's direction, cannot escape blame for many of the imperfections. Only a few of the actors know how to speak the Shakespearean language, or have they any sense of the classical style in acting.

* * *

Uneven as the text is, a company of trained Shakespeareans could make a pleasant revel out of it. They would have the breath to sustain the lines and the artifice by which a performance could be constructed. Philip Bourneuf as the pedantic Holofernes, Joseph Schildkraut as the seedily elegant Armado and Earl Montgomery as the courtly Boyet have mastered their parts; and although Paul Ballantyne's Costard, the swain, is rather more sophisticated than Shakespeare's, it is at least intelligible. "Love's Labour's Lost" has humor and exuberance when they dominate the stage. Unfortunately, the other actors are too general and too colloquial to evoke the sunny spirit of Shakespeare out of the loquacious text of this early comedy.

The fact that Mr. Marre's company plays it, not in Elizabethan costume, but in the costume of about a half century ago, is less important than it may seem to be. Scenically it is of the period of Maurice Evans' production of "Man and Superman"—as good as any other. But Mr. Marre has been dazzled by his own invention. He has dragged in an early vintage motor car and an old-fashioned talking machine with a huge horn.

Nothing could be less congenial to the spirit of Shakespeare than these labored items of stage hokum which are, in fact, a form of intellectual snobbery. If all Mr. Marre's actors could speak the language of Shakespeare, he would not have to divert attention from the performance to the production.

* * *

The last third of the performance does achieve some of the gaiety of formal court comedy. It is almost like an afterpiece. The satire of ostentation in language, which is virtually pointless today, yields to the artificial romance of a fête; and it discloses some of Shakespeare's most lovable qualities—his gallantry in manners, his respect for the intelligence of women, his literary grace, his enjoyment of rustics and his fascination with the make-believe of a pageant. It is easy to see in that sort of amiable mummery the kind of man he was.

This is the sort of thing that most becomes Mr. Marre's actors. Dressed with considerable splendor, relaxed as the guests at some one else's party, they capture the humor and friendliness of the play. And let's not forget that Mr. Bourneuf, Mr. Schildkraut, Mr. Ballantyne and Hurd Hatfield are the principal actors in this scene with their low-comedy impersonation of famous historical characters. They set the tone and they are the ablest people in the troupe.

It is pleasant to see one part of "Love's Labour's Lost" glowing with entertainment. If there were any way for young actors to learn the technique of classical acting, the whole play might have some of the same quality. But this performance as a whole, alas, shows how inadequate realistic acting is in a production that depends on style.

"LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Albert Marre; setting by Robert O'Hearn; costumes by Robert Fletcher; incidental dances by Todd Bolender; presented by The New York City Drama Company at New York City Center, February 4, 1953. The cast:

King of Navarre...Jerome Kilty
Longaville.....Robert Fletcher
Dumain.....Paul Sparer
Berowne.....Kevin McCarthy
Dull.....Fred Gwynne
Costard.....Paul Ballantyne
Don Adriano de Armado.....Joseph Schildkraut
Moth.....William McIver
Jacquenetta...Priscilla Morrill
Boyet.....Earl Montgomery
Princess of France.....Nancy Marchand
Maria.....Cavada Humphrey
Katherine.....Jan Farrand
Rosaline.....Meg Mundy
Lady-in-Waiting...Amanda Steel
Holofernes.....Philip Bourneuf
Sir Nathaniel.....Hurd Hatfield
Mercade.....Liam Sullivan
Attendants.....Albert Ducios and Richard Astor

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 5, 1953

Repertory Troupe Plays Bard Comedy

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Love's Labour's Lost," at the City Center, is an experiment in more ways than one. It is obvious why the limp Shakespearean comedy has not been done around here for over 50 years. Now it is revived, set in the Victorian period, and designed as the introduction to what was rumored as a potential permanent repertory company.

People often say American audiences do not like repertory, but the truth is they do not like the plays offered in it. "Love's Labour's Lost," beautiful as it is to watch, is typical of the precious, high-schoolish production that ruins the repertory idea.

If ever a play gave you the feeling of having a classic crammed down your throat just because it was classic, this is it.

Poetic Passages.

It has lovely poetic passages, as have all Shakespeare's plays. How many, though, is hard to tell. The company is directed so listlessly that the performers seem to be acting for each other.

The play is not unlike having messages on greeting cards read aloud to you all evening. The complications are so transparent and so meaningless that they can only be successfully played with substantial artifice. There are many reasons to do the play gently, but there seem few to do it with so little charm.

There are endless waits between cues, and ponderous pauses for the actors to make transitions. Occasional ingenious bits of business only point up the usual unimaginativeness of the movement.

Lavish Production.

The production is often lavish, with a soft formal exterior, against which the riding habits and diaphanous ball gowns are particularly striking.

The melancholy ending is quite without contrast, and seems endlessly extended.

The most striking performances are those of Philip Bourneuf and Hurd Hatfield, in comedy parts to which they have brought invention and character. Mr. Bourneuf is a bossy old pedant with a ring of authority, and Mr. Hatfield is delightful as a timid curate.

Joseph Schildkraut plays a dreamy schoolmaster, but he is so subdued by the deliberate gentleness of those around him that to define his character he must be incredibly quiet and soft. Kevin McCarthy plays the principal suitor with romantic enthusiasm. Meg Mundy is his lady love, but has little to do beyond sweep about in handsome clothes and look ravishing.

New York Post

February 5, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Rarely-Seen Shakespearean Play

It isn't difficult to understand why "Love's Labour's Lost" is so infrequently acted in the modern theater, but I'm glad I had an opportunity to see it done at the City Center last night, and I thought Albert Marre staged it with a great deal of imagination and freshness. There is a lot that is fairly hard going in this early Shakespeare comedy, and it is certainly not among the Bard's masterpieces, but it has frequent traces of beauty and charm and several engaging characterizations, and I think it was decidedly worth producing.

Mr. Marre, who is from New England's celebrated Brattle Theater, has given the play an Edwardian background, and, since there is no exactly notable loveliness in Edwardian costumes and setting, this might seem something of an affectation. I admit that it annoyed me a bit at first, but it has given the director a chance to introduce such humorously primitive props as an old automobile, an early phonograph, bicycles and even a croquet set, all of which add to the gayety of the occasion, and it seems to me they thereby justify him.

Couples and Clowns

Since the central situation of the play, which squares off four noble young couples in romantic involvement amid considerable formality of plot, is concerned with such topical Elizabethan targets as intellectual Utopias, cultural pretentiousness and literary fancifulness, it isn't of particular interest for today, despite some exquisite speeches written for Berowne, its hero. The result is that the emphasis for modern audiences must be on the comic characters, and here "Love's Labour's Lost" survives rather handsomely.

It is not that Don Adriano, the fantastic Spaniard, or Costard, the good-natured swain, or Dull, the lazy constable, or either Holofernes or Nathaniel, the pedants, is exactly the most hilarious of figures. Even as Elizabethan comics, they are indisputably minor personages as compared to Falstaff and Dogberry. But, if they don't arouse you to violent laughter, they have the great virtue of being extremely warm and human and alive, and of possessing, in at least the cases of Adriano and Costard, a winning sweetness amid their buffoonery.

The Victory

Toward the end of the play, there is a performance put on by the clowns for the edification of the upper classes, at which the boors are mocked for their pains, and, in such scenes, Shakespeare, in the manner of his time, could seem pretty mean-spirited for today's democratic taste. It is here, I think, that the comedy shows him at his happiest. For the King of Navarre and his court, amid their mockery, are put to shame by the gentle innocence of Adriano and Costard, and it is the clowns who have the final scene. The victory certainly rests with the buffoons.

The performances struck me as entirely in the right spirit. Joseph Schildkraut as Don Adriano, Paul Ballantyne as Costard and Fred Gwynn as Dull capture all the engaging simplicity of the characters, and Philip Bourneuf as Holofernes and Hurd Hatfield as Nathaniel give life to their less entertaining roles. Kevin McCarthy gives one of his best portrayals by capturing the dash and eloquence of Berowne, and Meg Mundy is a handsome and spirited Rosaline. The City Center has behaved adventurously and well in its opening production.

Daily Mirror

February 5, 1953

City Center Does Terrific Job on 'Love's Labour'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

For the past several years, the Brattle Theatre Company has been presenting original approaches to the classics up in Cambridge, Mass. Albert Marre, of that venturesome organization, was recently appointed artistic director of the New York City Drama Company. And last evening, at the City Center, gave us an idea of what Bostonians have been enjoying.

• • •

MARRE LAUNCHED his season with an imaginative, graceful interpretation of an early Shakespearean comedy, "Love's Labour's Lost." When the Bard penned it, he was preparing for more ambitious projects. He was learning about plot, characterization and dialogue. He was readying himself to write mighty, memorable verse.

Shakespeare was, on the whole, a derivative playwright. He read much, and wisely. He took good ideas wherever he found them, and turned dross into gold. In this instance, he was impishly satirizing Utopias such as Sir Thomas More had popularized. He was having a romp at the expense of royal gentlemen dedicated to monastic austerity and study.

Then arrived royal ladies to sway them from their vows. But a king's death puts a temporary end to the multiple romances. Love's labor was lost to a year of mourning and proof of constancy. In a sub-plot, the Bard introduced a masque provided by eccentric worthies for the entertainment of the visiting ladies. This form being popular at the Court of Queen Elizabeth.

• • •

MARRE HAS SEEN FIT to transfer the lark to the Edwardian period to give scope to the comics, to pad a rather thin script with inventine "business," against a picturesque background. The King of Navarre's academic retreat is reminiscent of Oxford or Cambridge. The gentlemen wear hunting and rugby football costumes, the ladies bloomers and shirtwaists, motor car dusters. And, horrors, the girls even smoke cigarets on the sly.

A primitive gas-buggy chugs on stage. Bicycles whirl about. And there is an immensely diverting croquet game, to say nothing of some inexpert and very funny archery. As a traditionalist, we were shocked by all these goings-on in the beginning. By the first act's end, we were convinced that the shenanigans should be titled "An Evening's Labour's Lost." But from then on, we were completely won over.

Jerome Kilty, Robert Fletcher, Paul Sparer and Kevin McCarthy, as the royal celibates; and Nancy Marchand, Cavada Humphrey, Jan Farrand and Meg Mundy, as the royal ladies who change their minds, are excellent. Salutes also are due Paul Ballantyne, Fred Gwynne, William McIver, Priscilla Morrill, Earl Montgomery and Hurd Hatfield in other roles.

• • •

BUT THE EVENING'S acting honors must go to Philip Bourneuf as a marvelously droll pedant, and Joseph Schildkraut as a "fantastical Spaniard." Bourneuf, a veteran Shakespearean with a fine sense of humor and a grand voice, offers hilarious moments. And Schildkraut fairly tears your heart out in the third canto with clowing that strikes a deeply tragic note.

Robert O'Hearn has designed a setting, and Robert Fletcher, costumes, that speak eloquently. That enhance the gaity of the proceedings.

If 'Love's Labour's Lost" is a sample of what Marre is going to give us at the City Center, we are a convert to the new regime. He has taken one of the Bard's weaker scripts and transformed it into an eminently rewarding frolic. We recommend that you see it. And we hope that you relish it as much as we did.

Journal-American

February 5, 1953

Marre Makes The Bard Shine

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE New York City Drama Company, under the new direction of Albert Marre, is currently rendering a distinctive and almost courageous service to the serious theatre-goers of the town in presenting, as their first effort for this season "Love's Labour's Lost" by Willie the Bard.

This is one of his earliest, certainly least-regarded plays, yet Marre has managed to manipulate it into an evening of interest and delight to even a mild student of Shakespeare.

He has switched the period from Elizabeth to Edward, has deleted a bit here and added pieces of business there, and has exacted deft and confident performances from a large and uniformly excellent cast.

Few of us alive have ever seen it performed, or may expect to again, so that aside from its rather startling emergence as a comedy of substance and beauty it also should be treasured as a collector's item. This sort of production was one of the original aims of the City Center of Music and Drama, and the present company should be congratulated for maintaining the tradition.

Puns and Pundits

The play itself concerns the King of Navarre and some gentlemen-in-waiting who have decided to turn the court into a sort of hermitage where they will devote three years to study and discussion, leading a monastic life free from women. This is the signal for the Princess of France to arrive with an equal number of ladies-in-attendance, all set to heave the wrench into the works.

This involves the familiar Shakespearean puns and pundits, any number of extraneous characters who walk in and out for no reason, a masquerade in which the four noblemen appear as Russian dancers, dozens of sly bits of poetry dedicated to the various ladies, and a happy ending in which it is rather generally agreed that the best thing the gentlemen can study for three years are the ladies.

In this present presentation, moved forward a couple of hundred years, Marre has made use of an early automobile, a highly hoked-up game of croquet and other little pleasantries that add generally to the fun without detracting from the quality and period of the language.

None of this succeeds in making it into a great play, which it obviously isn't, but there are still many of the Bard's barbs and epigrams and some of his most melodious, if not his most profound poetry.

Dominate Cast

The cast is dominated by Kevin McCarthy and Meg Mundy, as the dedicated lovers; in another sequence by Philip Bourneuf and Hurd Hatfield, as the pedant and the curate, respectively, and by Joseph Schildkraut, in the unpredicable part of Don Adriano, a sort of interlocutor.

Other solid contributions are offered by Paul Ballantyne, William McIver (another talented youth), Nancy Marchand, Fred Gwynne and, well, everybody else.

Robert Fletcher has made exceptional use of the period in providing colorful and occasionally breathtaking costumes, and Robert O'Hearn's setting, complete with cupola and the formal vista stretching into the background, takes practical advantage of the City Center's barnlike stage.

You'd better like Shakespeare—but if you do, you'd better go and see "Love's Labour's Lost."

DAILY NEWS

February 5, 1953

The Bard's 'Love's Labor's Lost' Is City Center's Gain—Delightful

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Three evenings in a row now I have gone pleasure-bound to a theatre and have run into unfathomable and possibly screwy plots. Monday it was "La Gioconda" at the Metropolitan Opera House, and I've never been able to unravel the story of this loud-singing contest. Tuesday it was "Touchstone," a mystifying drama which had much heart but little sense. Last evening, at the City Center, came the daftest of all—"Love's Labor's Lost," by a man named Shakespeare.

And last evening was by far the best of the three. Happily beginning a short season of drama, the City Center is offering a very handsome and genial production of one of The Bard's most unproduced plays. It is the conception of Albert Marre, the Center's new artistic director and is a carryover from a similar production Marre made two years ago at the Brattle Theater of Cambridge, Mass.

In the Edwardian Vein.

We have had Shakespeare in all kinds of dress, from traditional to modern. One of the best productions in my playgoing days was Orson Welles' "Julius Caesar" in modern dress, and another was a stylish version of "The Taming of the Shrew" by Basil Sydney and Mary Ellis. I can add to these memories, now, Mr. Marre's presentation of "Love's Labor Lost" in Edwardian garb. It may not be art, but it is fun—and I don't think this comedy is art anyhow.

At the City Center all the ladies on the stage look ravishing and the gentlemen look quaint. For example, Philip Bourneuf, as the pedant Holofernes, looks amazingly like the late Lloyd George and talks like him, too. For another example, Fred Gwynne, recently the bashful gangster named Stinker in "Mrs. McThing," looks like the prototype of the London Bobby in the part of Dull, the constable. Joseph Schildkraut, as the Spaniard, could easily be a Nineteenth Century fancy painting who has just stepped down off the wall.

Enjoyable and Tasteful.

It is easy to be too quaint and too cute in taking a play out of one period and putting it in another. The dangers are manifold and manifest. It seems to me that the City Center's production of "Love's Labor's Lost" has detoured all the obvious pitfalls and is an enjoyable and tasteful evening in the theatre.

Robert O'Hearn's single setting is stunning and very well lighted. Robert Fletcher's costumes, for ladies and gentlemen alike, are admirable, and Marre, the director, has found a great deal of fun in Shakespeare's fouled-up script. Shakespeare, indeed, was trying to be quainter and cuter than all of the good people at the City Center.

The good people are many. In addition to those already mentioned, there are Meg Mundy as a most beautiful Rosaline, Kevin McCarthy as a stalwart Berowne, little William McIver as a singing page boy, Hurd Hatfield as a typical British curate, and, as other fine feminine decorations, Cavada Humphrey, Jan Farrand and Nancy Marchand.

The revival will be played at the City Center through Feb. 15

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 5, 1953

'Love's Labour's Lost'

By WALTER F. KERR

LOVE'S labors were not the only ones lost at City Center Wednesday. Shakespeare's name mislaid somewhere, too.

Albert Marre, the talented young director who has just taken charge of the municipal playhouse's fortunes, is no doubt right in thinking that "Love's Labour's Lost" needs some sort of special styling—some elaborate gimmicking—if it is to prove sturdy enough for popular revival. The play is an early and fragile artifice, bursting with a light and lyrical wit, but perilously primitive and diffuse in its plotting.

To dress it up, Mr. Marre has moved the whole thing forward into the Edwardian era. Against a gingerbread background smacking strongly of the Oxford of "Charley's Aunt," a donnish King of Navarre pledges himself and his friends to three years of bachelor study.

* * *

When the princess who is to upset this regime arrives, she boils on to the stage in an overheated motor-car. Left alone with her retinue, she lights up a furtive cigarette. Dull, the local constable, becomes a British bobby; Costard, the clown, turns into a flashily outfitted confidence man; Nathaniel, the curate, pedals in on a vintage bicycle; and the Spanish fantastic, Armado, whiles away his hours in a hammock as his servant changes records on the gramophone.

Behind all of this irrelevant improvisation there is a pleasant sense of visual comedy, a feeling for atmospheric mockery. But the unhappy truth of the matter is that City Center's handsome and ambitious production is effective only as pantomime. The costume parades are eye-filling; the incidental music is agreeable; the stage pictures are nicely arranged. With Shakespeare stowed safely away in the wings, Philip Bourneuf is able to make something quite funny out of an involved and dishonest croquet game.

But when it is time for speech, for those poetic sallies and wry jests which presumably make the piece worth reviving, Mr. Marre's actors lose all zest for the enterprise. The over-all speech patterns are not only intolerably slow, they are studiously prosaic. There is music in the orchestra pit, but none on the stage. Whatever verve and dash may be left in this infrequently mounted concept is hopelessly masked by a confidential and desultory reading.

Some reliable players are involved in these muffled goings-on, and at least two of them do manage to give attractive definition to their roles. Mr. Bourneuf, as the crusty old schoolmaster Holofernes, rolls off his pedantries with a relish, draws his tea through his mustache with succulent enthusiasm, and shoots a surprising amount of life into the business of organizing an amateur charade while reserving the best parts for himself.

Joseph Schildkraut sighs with melancholy elegance as the posturing Don Armado—he is given spats for the current occasion—and he brings off a rather startling shift to sentiment in the play's final scene with perfect aplomb.

Kevin McCarthy, Paul Ballantyne and Fred Gwynne work hard at material which succeeds in eluding them, and the girls—Nancy Marchand, Meg Mundy, Cavada Humphrey and Jan Farrand—are at least dazzling to look at in the hunting outfits and period evening gowns which Robert Fletcher has whipped up for them.

"Touchstone"

DAILY NEWS
February 4, 1953

'Touchstone' an Earnest, Confused Drama About Almost Everything

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Elaine Perry, daughter of the late, much-loved and theatrically hard-headed Antoinette Perry, made her debut as a theatrical producer last evening by presenting "Touchstone," a play by William Stucky, at the Music Box. Her first notice in this newspaper isn't going to be much fun for her to read or for me to write, because "Touchstone" is a confused, confusing and diffuse drama which might throw any play-producer.

Stucky has elected to write a piece in two acts and six scenes which includes nearly everything. It concerns faith, racial tolerance, practical medicine, religious hallucinations, organized clergy, a dying child, enlightened agnosticism, mass hysteria, cynical politics and the stupidity of big business — and it doesn't get very far with any of these topics. Nor does it, as a play, build the continuing interest one expects from theatre.

Many Faith Cures.

The locale of "Touchstone" is somewhere in the South. Here is a small Negro boy has been touched with religious fervor, and the strength of his faith is such that a polluted swiming hole becomes pure and the colored people from all around flock there and go bathing to be cured of their ills. Some of the cures seem to work, at least for a while; but when the pretty little white girl of the household falls into desperate ailment from a mysterious malady, her young friend is prevented from bathing her in the healing waters and she dies.

Around this part of the plot a great amount of philosophical rumination is spread, but last evening I never could figure out what Stucky had in mind. I did admire somewhat the performance of Josh White Jr. as the small boy who has become possessed, and I admired even more the playing of Ian Keith as a gentleman who describes himself as a "Christian agnostic." Whenever Keith had command he tried to pull the play together and give it some force and point.

But It Gets Nowhere.

But Keith was outnumbered by several other actors and by very many of the author's earnest ideas. The company includes Ossie Davis as a modest and intelligent Negro doctor, Ann Dere as a forthright white woman doctor, Paul McGrath as an aspiring politician, Guy Arbury as a quite reverend reverend, Evelyn Ellis as a motherly Negro housekeeper, Carl Low as a mousy Chamber of Commerce man and Patty McCormack as the pretty little girl who is going to die.

"Touchstone" has a nice setting of a comfortable Southern home, designed by George Jenkins. It has been directed by Hale McKeen, and I don't think he knows what William Stucky was driving at, either.

"TOUCHSTONE"

Play by William Stucky; staged by Hale McKeen; setting by George Jenkins; presented by Elaine Perry at the Music Box Theatre, February 3, 1953. The cast:

Aunt Emma.....Evelyn Ellis
Dr. Joseph Clay....Ossie Davis
Cathy Roberts..Patty McCormack
Jimmy Clay.....Josh White, Jr.
Maj. Robert Spaulding..Ian Keith
Dr. Gwendolyn Taliafero.....Ann Dere
Rev. Ronald Thompson.....Guy Arbury
Langdon Spaulding.....Paul McGrath
Charles Tutwell.....Carl Low

New York Post

February 4, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Boy Who Believed in a Vision

There is a deep and honest intensity of feeling in "Touchstone," the drama by William Stucky, a Kentucky newspaperman, which opened at the Music Box last night, and that is not a quality to be dismissed lightly in the modern theater. But the new play, which has to do with a little Negro boy who sees visions and believes in miracles, seems to me also overwrought, heavy-handed and considerably confused, with the result that it emerges as more painful than moving and ends on a note of uncertainty and discomfort.

It is only fair for me to confess immediately that I am not at all sure what Mr. Stucky is driving at in "Touchstone." I am willing to grant that, to a certain extent, this may be caused by my own lack of sensitivity toward this particular type of play, but I suspect that a definite amount of my uncertainty arises from a confusion in the work itself. Clearly, the dramatist is a man of fine sincerity, who believes earnestly in the mystic value of faith, but I don't think he is quite skillful enough to communicate that quality to an audience.

Belief and Doubt

I certainly do not mean it as a reflection on his earnestness of viewpoint when I say that Mr. Stucky has a tendency to try eating his cake and still holding on to it. There are times when he appears to offer a sardonic commentary on the harm that can be done by the attempt to substitute miracles for science, and there are other moments when he grows contemptuous at the expense of the doubters in his story. He is unquestionably sympathetic toward the boy who sees the vision, but he assuredly leaves him amid the wreckage of his dreams.

To get down to some details, the boy of his tale believes that he receives visitations from a beautiful lady, who tells him that a nearby swimming hole, instead of being unhealthy, has mysterious curative values. Although his father, an earnest young doctor, is convinced that his son is in need of a psychiatrist, the swimming hole becomes a place where strange cures are worked on the credulous Negroes of the community. A friendly and benevolent white man is sympathetic toward the boy, but when his granddaughter falls ill, he refuses to have the miracle tried on her.

More Narrative

The boy nevertheless tries to carry the girl to the swimming hole, but he is stopped just before he gets her there, and the child dies. At the close, the young mystic seems on the verge of being cured of his hallucinations, but the author appears to feel that they have done some good anyway. All of this, and a great deal more, is told with the grimmest earnestness, but it is my skeptical impression that "Touchstone" becomes more and more confused and out of hand until, by the final scene, it is lost in something approaching chaos.

The acting shares the sincerity of the play, with, perhaps, a bit of its confusion. Josh White Jr. plays the boy with touching sincerity and directness, while Ossie Davis, as his doctor-father, and Ian Keith, as the sympathetic white man, give life and credibility to their difficult characterizations. There are helpful performances by Paul McGrath as an ambitious politician, Ann Dere as a woman doctor, Guy Arbury as a doubting clergyman, and Evelyn Ellis as a believer in the boy's visions. But intensity of feeling is not enough in the drama.

New York Herald Tribune

February 4, 1953

'Touchstone'

By WALTER F. KERR

IF "TOUCHSTONE," which opened at the Music Box Tuesday, were as moving as it is intelligent, author William Stucky might have quite a striking little play on his hands. This young dramatist—who is not to be dismissed lightly—has braced himself to a difficult religious theme and brought off long portions of it with credibility, restraint and a certain level-headed candor.

His subject is no simple one. A Negro lad, "somewhere in the horse country of the upper south," has seen visions of a lady. In one of his ecstasies the already devout boy is told that a body of polluted water, long used as a neighborhood swimming hole, has been miraculously cleansed and now possesses healing powers.

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The news creates a local stir—religious, social and political—and it also brings the boy's father, a successful Los Angeles doctor, hurrying home. The father tries to rationalize away the youngster's "hallucinations," a fair-minded local medico begins to speak of psychiatric care, and a community bigwig who is on the verge of running for the Senate considers the commotion a serious national liability.

If Jimmy Clay had a defender it is Maj. Robert Spaulding, in whose liberal-minded household the boy lives. The major is a brittle and aging cynic who likes to insist that every side of a debate produce adequate evidence, and who takes a special delight in watching the scientific mind squirm when it attempts to deal with Jimmy's intractable mysticism.

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In working out his battle of faiths, Mr. Stucky has pushed things to fairly melodramatic heights. The Major's granddaughter becomes seriously ill, Jimmy attempts to cure her by plunging her into his miraculous waters, he is prevented by a sober and severely rational Anglican minister, and the child dies. The play ends on the Major's effort to salvage Jimmy's faith, and to find a sustaining one of his own.

Much of this interplay between belief and skepticism is developed in such a subdued, plain-spoken and common-sense style that you are willing to follow the author a good distance into his spiritual labyrinth. You feel that these are serisible people, and that they may finally have something coherent and revealing to say.

But it is possible that the play's principle virtue is also its principal defect. The very restraint, the same reasonable detachment, which makes the play's materials credible also denies them any real exaltation, any soaring emotional release. The mood thins out and becomes dry, the play's steady interest becomes an academic one. And, in the absence of any poetic fervor, the final curtain can only come down on polite ambiguities.

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An excellent cast keeps a tight checkrein on this slippery dramatic terrain. Ian Keith, as the Major whose emotions have atrophied with the death of his wife but whose intellect is still acidly alive, plays with an easy irony, making the most of his sardonic asides and turning a bitter and restless figure into an appealing one.

More than any one else, Paul McGrath is able to give shape and form to the play's placidly paced scenes, and two of his moments—one in which he unctuously traps the Negro boy into a sort of recantation, and another in which he turns demagogue to sound off about the Major's "jelly-minded liberalism"—are among the evening's best.

Josh White Jr. is given the relatively thankless job of coping with several apparition scenes. The language does not give him the lift he needs—it rarely rises above the "It's me, Lord—Jimmy" sort of religious writing—but he manages to remain unaffected and straightforward throughout. Ossie Davis is excellent as the lad's crisp, businesslike and understanding father, and Ann Dere has a briefly touching climactic bit as a woman doctor called upon to defend her profession.

"Touchstone" is an earnest and sometimes perceptive piece of writing, but it lacks the passion which might have made it thoroughly compelling.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 4, 1953

Touchstone' Is a Drama of Faith

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Touchstone" is a drama about faith and innocence, based on the unusual and challenging situation of a child who professes to see miraculous visions which lead to remarkable cures. It opened last night at the Music Box.

The play is dramatically inconclusive. The child's experience has a definite effect on the adults around him, but the issue of its authenticity is carefully dodged. Theatrically, too, the narrative has conflict without ever exploding into a climax.

The over-all effect is comparable to watching the raised track made in a lawn by a mole which never comes to the surface.

A little Negro boy, whose busy doctor father has constantly left him, apparently compensates for his loneliness by summoning up visions of a mysterious lady who brings him messages from God. Eventually the child believes that a swimming hole can cure illnesses. The entire countryside stops work to see it.

Faith Versus Science.

A scientific test proves that the formerly contaminated water is suddenly pure, but there is a possible explanation for this in certain springs near the brook.

The owner of the property protects the little boy until his own granddaughter falls desperately ill. The doctors are unable to cure her and the boy tries to wash her in the spring. Since he is stopped, you never know whether he might have saved the girl or actually is responsible for her death.

Realistic Style.

The play is done in quiet, realistic style. The result is so antitheatrical in being so literal that one has the feeling of eavesdropping on conversations which are none of his business.

The most striking part of course is that of the little boy, and it is strikingly played. Josh White Jr. is that rare article in the theater, a juvenile actor with confidence, balance and authority, who never for a moment seems precocious. Several times he is asked to hold the stage alone, and does it with economy of timing and sincerity. It is first-rate performing.

The rest of the cast has little chance to stand out or score. Ossie Davis is agreeable as the boy's father and Ian Keith plays gently with most of the play's humor. Paul McGrath makes no bones about being an opportunist as the politician brother of Keith, who fears the mass hysteria the curing waters will invoke.

Evelyn Ellis is a kindly aunt of the child and Ann Dere plays a woman doctor whose bluntness eventually cracks with emotion.

Journal-American

February 4, 1953

Its Original Sparks Become Smothered

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE are many laudable facets to "Touchstone," a new play by William Stucky which opened at the Music Box Theatre last evening. Individual scenes come to life, strangely disengaged from the central theme, and for a time one is emotionally stirred. The principal players perform with brilliance, the proceedings are mounted with taste and infinite respect for detail.

But somewhere along the line the original spark becomes smothered, and the evening straggles interminably toward its unrewarding end. The show is not over-long, but most customers emerged from the premises with the conviction that their watches had stopped. The people and their problems don't hold the pace.

Boy Has Visions

Mr. Stucky is concerned in this monograph with a liberal Southern aristocrat who has lavished his affections on three people: his own orphaned granddaughter, a Negro he has sent through medical school who is now a practicing physician, and the physician's motherless son.

The little Negro boy has visions, principally that the water in the local swimming hole provides unusual healing qualities. This creates a communal crise, as hundreds of citizens desert their labors to indulge in the "cure." And then of course the aristocrat's own granddaughter falls desperately ill.

It is at this point that the festivities become slightly diffused. He wants his protege, the Negro doctor, to stick around and help save his grandchild; the doctor wants to get his son away where he can get treatment for his mental delusions.

There are some highly strident moments among these three characters which seemed oddly lacking in motivation, as a result.

Ian Keith, as the proud Southerner, gives a remarkably relaxed and believable performance in a role which is never quite plausible.

Ossie Davis is authoritative and competent as the Negro doctor, but it is a thankless part. Until the closing moments he walks on and off at intervals, delivers bright and respectful lines, but rarely has a chance to dominate a scene.

Paul McGrath, as ever, is superlative as the politically-ambitious brother who wants to put a quick end to this civic mess and not lose any votes in the process. I must say there were times when I agreed with him.

There are certain reservations about the performances of Josh White Jr., and Patty McCormack, the kids who play the son of the doctor and the grandchild. I guess we expect too much of juveniles and I have no quarrel with the acting ability of either. I just couldn't understand either of them half the time, and I had a good seat.

2 Women Fine

Evelyn Davis is warm and wonderful as the old colored maid and Ann Dere, a most engaging actress, brings great pathos to one scene in which she reveals the heartbreak of being a lady doctor.

George Jenkins deserves a special salute for designing a single set which looked like the cluttered drawing room of a home in the horse country.

But "Touchstone," regretfully, will not create its own miracle of remaining long in our midst.